

# Trial by fire for chairmen

*But what an awesome power to wield in the Legislature*

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There's more to managing a **General Assembly** committee than merely switching one's desk from the back bench to the front row.

"It's like one of these circus acts," said Sen. Brian E. Frosh, the Montgomery County Democrat who took over the Judicial Proceedings Committee this year, "where a guy puts a stick on his nose and the six pieces of china and cutlery and is spinning balls.

"You have to deal with everyone's problems all the time."

Elections and retirements cost the Senate all four standing committee chairmen and two vice chairmen, while in the House a new Speaker decided to shake things up by reorganizing and creating new committees.

The result was plenty of new people in leadership positions — and lots to learn about the switch from rank and file member to committee head.

"I guess when I was majority leader I got the sense there was some autonomy in being a committee head, but I didn't realize how much," said Del. Maggie L. McIntosh, D-Baltimore, chairwoman of the House Environmental Matters Committee. "It was like my own little fiefdom."

With pretty much free rein to run her committee, she said, House Speaker Michael E. Busch called her into his office to talk about legislation only a handful of times. Most discussions were brief, McIntosh said, because they already agreed.

Prior to the session there was plenty of speculation about a "brain drain" in the Legislature, with the departure of strong leaders such as Senate Budget and Taxation Committee Chairwoman Barbara A. Hoffman and Finance Committee boss Thomas Bromwell, and the institutional memory of the late Clarence Blount. Those standards set by those they were replacing were felt very strongly among the new leadership.

"Having never served a day on finance prior to heading this committee, it was a real learning curve for me," said Sen. Thomas M. Middleton, D-Charles, chairman of the Finance Committee, which

handles everything from banking and health care to horse racing regulation. "I had never paid any attention. I'm a farmer. ... I don't read Wall Street."

To catch up, Middleton said, he met with those in the know three days a week in Annapolis prior to the session. Middleton also frequently sought the wisdom of his experienced committee analysts and members.

But, he said, he also was keenly aware of the internal dynamics of his committee, and that there might be some jealousy about his move from Budget and Taxation to head Finance. The key, Middleton said, was to "put the elephant on the table" and admit his inexperience while allowing committee members as much "ownership" as they wanted.

"It's not just government, it's politics," said Del. Dereck Davis, D-Prince George's, who was a surprise pick in December to lead the House Economic Matters Committee. "You have to be constantly mindful of that."

Managing philosophies among members, Davis said, is a challenge because a chairman does not want a 13-11 committee vote that could haunt him during floor debate in front of the full House. Other dynamics, such as freshmen Republicans changing their positions after a caucus meeting, are new for a committee leader as well.

"I clearly knew that folks were watching — wondering how I'd do," Davis said of expectations.

For McIntosh, managing expectations meant taking a conservative approach to legislation the committee sent to the floor this session. There was plenty she did not know, McIntosh admitted, so the "big" bills Environmental Matters sent to the floor were "consensus" pieces or had the approval of the Senate.

"Don't expect to change the world this year," she said. "There were a lot of bills that we didn't pass that Del. McIntosh would have voted for."

But she also learned a valuable lesson during the debate about allowing county and municipal police to use radar speed cameras in residential neighbor-

hoods.

The bill passed through the Senate but McIntosh had concerns about local jurisdictions facing tight budgets using the cameras as a revenue source. The Environmental Matters Committee amended the bill so that a large portion of the revenue went to firefighters and police for homeland security needs.

If the Senate wanted the bill, McIntosh said, it had to accept her changes — an "unbelievable" power.

While political management was important, nearly every chairman admitted the mundane task of managing committee hearings was even more important.

As a regular member, Frosh noted, one can tune out on testimony and debate because many bills have been proposed numerous times, while the member's position is already set on others. But the chairman, he said, must move the debate along while making sure everyone has a say.

The chairman, Middleton noted, also must make sure that every question that needs to be asked is posed.

"The thing that was foremost in my mind is, I believe very seriously in the public input process," Middleton said. "I would make sure the person sitting in that audience left our hearing thinking the committee was objective and fair.

"It just required a whole lot of diplomacy."